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Citation for published version:

Chrisman, M 2012, On the Meaning of 'Ought'. in R Shafer-Landau (ed.), *Oxford Studies in Metaethics*. vol. 7, Oxford Studies in Metaethics, Oxford University Press, pp. 304-332.
<<http://ukcatalogue.oup.com/product/9780199653508.do#UZO2Lr4VBk>>

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Oxford Studies in Metaethics

Publisher Rights Statement:

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This paper is forthcoming in *Oxford Studies in Metaethics*, vol. 7, pending copy-editing; for the definitive and final form of the paper, please consult that volume.

On the Meaning of 'Ought'¹

Matthew Chrisman

I begin here in §1 with some *prima facie* linguistic difficulties had by two prominent metaethical accounts of the meaning of normative terms – basically the accounts implicit in realism and expressivism – when these are applied in a straightforward albeit naïve way to the word 'ought'. In §2, I explain what I take to be the standard framework in theoretical semantics for accounting for the semantic value of modal auxiliaries and discuss its (not completely straightforward) application to the word 'ought'. Then, in §3 I evaluate this account in comparison to the more traditional metaethical views of the meaning of 'ought'. The upshot of these initial sections of this paper is that, although the standard framework raises some issues that require further refinement, there is strong reason to view the word 'ought' as some kind of univocal sentential operator whose semantic function is not, in the first instance, to refer to obligations nor to express moral attitudes – as some metaethicists seem to think – but to affect the modality of a sentence.

In my view, this syntactico-semantic hypothesis easily overcomes the linguistic difficulties besetting naïve applications of realism and expressivism to the word 'ought', and it constitutes a systematic application of a more general semantic framework that has the resources to cover all modal auxiliaries (and potentially much more). However, rather than taking that to settle metaethical questions about the meaning of 'ought', which are at issue between realists and expressivists, I want to argue in the later sections of this paper that it points us in a new direction for thinking about these questions. I explore this first in §4, where I offer a constructive reinterpretation of the debate about the meaning of normative terms like 'ought' between realists and expressivists. That is, I seek an interpretation on

¹ I appreciate support for research on this paper provided by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and the Pragmatic Foundations Project led by Huw Price at the University of Sydney. I would also like to thank Janice Dowell, Graham Hubbs, Jonathan McKeown-Green, Michael Ridge and two anonymous reviewers for Oxford University Press for helpful written comments on earlier versions of this material. Audiences at the Metaethics Workshop at the University of Madison, the University of Cape Town, and the Logical Pragmatism Conference at the University of Auckland gave me engaging and helpful feedback. Some readers will notice that this paper bears more than a mere titular resemblance to an earlier paper in this series: Ralph Wedgwood's "The Meaning of 'Ought'". In several ways, Wedgwood's paper and mine are about the same topic, and we come at this topic from a similar conviction that progress can be made in metaethical debates about the meaning of normative terms in general by being more sensitive to the aspects of semantic theory that are relevant to understanding the meaning of particular terms like 'ought'. However, although we both ultimately favor some sort of conceptual/inferential role account of the meaning of 'ought', I think we disagree deeply about how to get there and what bearing this has on the broader metaethical debate between realists and expressivists.

which both parties can accept that 'ought' functions semantically as a modal operator but disagree at a deeper (so to speak, "metasemantic" level) about why it is that 'ought' operates semantically in the way the standard framework in theoretical semantics predicts that it does. Then, in §5 I conclude by tentatively suggesting an alternative inferentialist interpretation of why it is that 'ought' operates semantically in the way that it does.

1. LINGUISTIC PROBLEMS FOR REALISM AND EXPRESSIVISM

Metaethical realists believe that there are real properties, such as rightness and wrongness, goodness and badness, as well as real relations like having an overriding reason to do or being morally permitted to do. Debate among realists concerns the nature of these properties and relations (reducible, irreducible, subjective, objective, etc.). What is important here is that there is a *descriptivist* assumption implicit in most versions of this view. This is the idea that the relevant expressions mean what they do in virtue of what aspects of reality they purport to represent, refer to, or describe – i.e. in virtue of a putative word-world descriptive relation.

A popular alternative to realism² is some form of expressivism. In one way, this view differs from realism more drastically than fictionalism in that it rejects the underlying descriptivist interpretation of the relevant expressions. The basic idea is that the mental states conventionally expressed by normative claims are nonrepresentational, and we can identify them naturalistically in a psychological account of their functional role in motivating action (e.g. as noncognitive or desire-like attitudes). Consequently, the relevant expressions are said to mean what they do in virtue of their role in conventionally expressing these nonrepresentational mental states – in short, in virtue of a word-idea expressive relation.

This is all relatively familiar, but it is much less familiar what these views say about the meaning of the specific word 'ought'. This is a normative term *par excellence*; it figures prominently in the statement of many general ethical principles and specific practical conclusions. But what are the realist and expressivist accounts of its meaning?

A naïve application of the descriptivist assumption implicit in realism generates the view that this word also means what it does in virtue of the aspect of reality to which it purports to refer. But which aspect is that? From the point of view of metaethics, perhaps the most straightforward idea is that 'ought' refers to a relation an agent can stand in to an action: something like the relation of being obligated to do. By contrast, a naïve application of the expressivist idea about the meaning of normative terms generates the view that 'ought' means what it does in virtue of its role in the conventional expression of a nonrepresentational mental state with a distinctive functional role in the psychology of motivation. But which mental state is that? From the point of view of metaethics, perhaps the most straightforward idea is that 'ought' functions to express some naturalistically identifiable attitude that is essentially connected to our motivations, such as being for³ someone's acting in

² Here I shall neglect error-theory and fictionalism, which I view as agreeing with the descriptivist assumption in realism but disagreeing with the coordinate metaphysics and epistemology. However, because it is the descriptivist assumption that is primarily at issue here, I think much of what I say about realism carries over *mutatis mutandis* to these views.

³ It needs to be some very general nonrepresentational mental state for it to be at all plausible that ought-sentences express it. However, the standard expressivist proposals

some way (whose expression is plausibly thought to be essential for commendation).

In both cases, these ideas are encouraged by the observation that when we use the word 'ought', we are very often thinking and talking about whether specific actions (types or tokens) conform to moral norms. Realists think these norms are of parts of reality. Hence, they think there exists a relation of obligatoriness referred to by 'ought', which relates agents to the actions that are required by morality. This idea underwrites our sense that there is usually some fact of the matter about what we and others ought to do. By contrast, expressivists think that morality is not to be found as norms somehow existing out there in reality; rather they think morality is a system of norms stemming from a pattern of practical attitudes that is naturally ingrained in us by the biological and social pressures of living together in human community. So they will say that a central attitude for this system is the attitude of being for some action, and we use the word 'ought' to express this attitude when we commend specific actions. This idea underwrites our expectation that normal people will tend *ceteris paribus* to act in the way they themselves think they ought to do, without any special further desire to do what they ought to do.

It sometimes seems to me that one's theoretical preference between realism and expressivism is due to whether one is more impressed by the intuition that there is some fact of the matter about what we and others ought to do or by the intuition that one will tend *ceteris paribus* to act in the way that one thinks one ought to. In spite of these motivations, however, I think both the realist and expressivist accounts of the meaning of 'ought' just mentioned are radically implausible from a linguistic point of view. To begin to appreciate this, consider the following three linguistic facts about 'ought', which neither view accounts for very well.

First, we clearly attach 'ought' to things other than actions that are obligatory or commendable. This of course includes non-actions that are nevertheless things agents might in some broad sense "do", e.g. "Jamie ought to feel more sympathy for the bereaved". However, it also includes actions that are arguably never obligatory or commendable, e.g. "In order to murder someone messily, you ought to use a chainsaw". Moreover, the scope of 'ought' in ordinary English also extends to things that are not directly agential at all, e.g. "Grandfather clocks ought to chime at noon". And, arguably, it even includes things that are completely outside the control of any agent, e.g. "There ought to be perpetual world peace". There may be ways to gerrymander an account of 'ought' as referring to obligatoriness or expressing an attitude of being for some action to cover some of these cases, but considering them afresh without the prejudices of our prior metaethical commitments should make the naïve and straightforward applications of realism and expressivism seem like implausible starting points for an account of the content of 'ought'.

Second, a sentence like

(1) Jerry ought to be there.

is ambiguous. On the reading that will be most familiar in moral philosophy, (1) means, roughly, that Jerry is obliged (obligated, has overriding reason) to be there. However, on another reading, (1) means, roughly, that Jerry is likely to be there. This latter reading is sometimes called the "epistemic" reading of 'ought' to contrast

such as approval and disapproval don't seem to work for reasons explained by Mark Schroeder, *Being For*, ch. 3-4. He suggests, helpfully, that expressivists might appeal to the attitude of being for something. However, as should become apparent in §4 below, I disagree with the basic premise of Schroeder's book that expressivism has to be seen as engaged in the project of developing a compositional semantics for normative language.

it with the former which I will call the “normative” reading of ‘ought’.⁴ The epistemic reading of ‘ought’ doesn’t appear to have anything to do with obligatoriness or being for something.

It may be tempting at this stage to suggest that the word ‘ought’ must be ambiguous.⁵ Perhaps, it’s only on its “core” (or at least “metaethically interesting”) meaning that it describes a relation of being obligated to do something or expresses a distinctive nonrepresentational mental state like being for someone’s acting in particular ways, and in other senses it means that something else, like an attitude, inanimate process, or state of affairs would be preferable in some way to a set of alternatives; and in still other senses it means that some outcome is likely or probable given some assumed body of evidence. However, this retreat to ambiguity or “multiple senses of ‘ought’” overlooks another hypothesis that is probably the dominant working assumption in theoretical semantics: the multiple readings of a sentence like (1) is due to some sort of semantic incompleteness in the verb ‘ought’, which often requires extra-sentential information to make determinate.⁶

That is to say that (1) is not like the sentence “Jerry bores them”, which could mean either that Jerry makes a certain kind of hole in something or that Jerry makes his audience weary and disinterested. The availability of these two readings is explained by the coincidence of English that the same sign-design – ‘bore’ – is used to mean two completely different things, and hence the word ‘bore’ gets two

⁴ The term “normative” is not completely happy for the distinction intended. For one thing, it is not clear that the epistemic ‘ought’ is “non-normative”. Moreover, “normative” ‘ought’s, in the sense intended here, include moral, legal, teleological, and bouletic ought-claims. This is in spite of the fact that some philosophers will think that only some of these are “genuinely normative”. Linguists often refer to these as species of “root” modals. However, I use the term “normative” here for its relative familiarity in philosophy.

⁵ See G. E. Moore, *Philosophical Studies*, p. 319, for an early and clear example of the ambiguity strategy, but I think its influence continues. For instance, Harman writes “One would intuitively distinguish at least four senses of the word ought...” in “Review of *the Significance of Sense: Meaning, Modality, and Morality*”, p. 235; and Broome writes, “Our word ‘ought’ has a meaning that varies with the context, and it is sometimes ambiguous even in a single context” in *Rationality through Reason*, p. 5 of the manuscript. However, Harman and Broome are clearly much more sensitive to some of the facts mentioned in this section than Moore was. It’s important that all of these philosophers are making a claim about the word ‘ought’ and not about ought-sentences, because everyone agrees that a sentence like (1) has multiple readings, and the question is whether this is due to ambiguity in the word ‘ought’ or something else. When philosophers and linguists suggest that a word has multiple senses or is ‘ambiguous’, it is not always clear what they mean or that they mean the same thing. The important claim here is that the word should get distinct entries in a lexicon for the language, reflecting the hypothesis that language learners have to learn these meanings separately and that there are separate rules implicitly followed when interpreting the word in ordinary comprehension of sentences in which it figures.

⁶ See W. J. Rees, “Moral Rules and the Analysis of ‘Ought’” and Judith Thomson, *Goodness and Advice*, pp. 44-47, for philosophical arguments against the ambiguity view as well as Anna Papafragou, *Modality: Issues in the Semantics-Pragmatics Interface*, ch. 3 for linguistic arguments against positing ambiguity in the system of modal verbs. Theoretical semanticists sometimes disagree about whether ‘ought’ and other modals admit of epistemic/normative ambiguity. This, however, is different from the sort of ambiguity that would be needed to uphold the view that one of the distinct lexical meanings of ‘ought’ has to do with referring to obligations or expressing attitudes of being for something. Legal, teleological, and bouletic modals are all broadly normative (and so non-epistemic), yet it’s implausible to interpret all of these ‘ought’s as referring to obligations or expressing attitudes of being for something.

entries in any good English dictionary. In other languages, there are different sign-designs to express these two meanings. By contrast, good English dictionaries do not have two separate entries for the verb 'ought'.⁷ This is because most of the same diversity of readings are available for other modal auxiliary verbs like 'may' and 'must', and in most of their plausible translations into other languages. This is the third linguistic fact about 'ought': it participates in a robustly intra- and inter-linguistic system of meanings that widely supports a diversity of "flavors" of modality. Hence, it appears to be no mere coincidence of the sign-design 'ought' that (1) has multiple readings, rather it seems to be something more structural in the system of modal auxiliary verbs in English.

However, if the ambiguity in (1) isn't due to an ambiguity in the word 'ought', then how can we explain it? And how can we account for the meaning of 'ought' more generally, if not via the naïve and straightforward applications of realism and expressivism adumbrated above?

I think we will not be in a position to answer these questions satisfactorily until we take a somewhat more comprehensive view of the system of modal auxiliaries in English. So, in the next section, I shall sketch the bare bones of what seems to me to be the most prominent account of this system in theoretical semantics. This account is prominent because of how well it unifies our understanding of the semantic contribution of various modal auxiliaries to the various sentences in which they figure. Consequently, I believe it has much better prospects for satisfactorily explaining the three linguistic facts about 'ought' than our original versions of realism and expressivism about this word did.

2. A PROMINENT SEMANTICS FOR MODAL AUXILIARIES, SUCH AS 'OUGHT'

Modal logic primarily concerns the logical relations of the alethic modal notions of necessity and possibility. According to the now standard account of the semantic contribution of the words (and formal symbols) expressing these notions, their contribution to the content of the whole sentences and formulas in which they figure can be represented with existential and universal quantifications over sets of possible worlds. This basic approach to modeling the semantic contribution of alethic modal notions is very familiar in contemporary philosophy. We distinguish different kinds of modality by restricting the scope of the quantification along one dimension. For example, what's logically possible is what's true in at least some *logically* possible worlds, what's physically necessary is what's true in all *physically* possible worlds, and so on.

⁷ The *OED* gives the following as "The only current use in standard English" of the verb 'ought': "Expressing duty or obligation of any kind; originally used of moral obligation, but also in various more general senses, expressing what is proper, correct, advisable, befitting, or expected." Despite this single lexical entry, some philosophers and linguists have suggested that the verb 'ought' is syntactically ambiguous – evoking control structures in some contexts and raising structures in other contexts. This is a difficult issue to settle but I think they are wrong, which I argue in my paper "'Ought' and Control" and return to briefly in §3 below. It's worth mentioning that comprehensive English dictionaries do have a separate entry for the noun 'ought', which is an orthographic variant of 'aught', which in turn is an antiquated word for zero. Here, however, I am discussing the verb 'ought' articulated in the primary dictionary entry, which is a modal auxiliary verb generating sentences with epistemic and normative readings. And I think it would be a mistake to see these readings as resulting from mere ambiguity like we see with 'bore'.

As it turns out, these alethic modal notions are uncommon in ordinary English, and they rarely provide a plausible interpretation of ordinary uses of modal auxiliary verbs. However, Angelika Kratzer discovered that one can make a lot of progress in understanding the semantic contribution of modal auxiliaries by deploying the possible worlds framework but allowing the scope of the quantification to vary in two dimensions rather than just one.⁸ First, she posits a restriction due to conversationally determined background conditions. Here, we should allow for a distinction between “informational” and “circumstantial” background conditions – that is, the items of someone’s relevant informational state (or evidence) and the *de facto* circumstances of the relevant situation. Either way, Kratzer suggests that we can interpret ordinary language modals by first restricting the set of all possible worlds to the ones consistent with the background conditions. The resulting set is what she calls the “modal base”. Second, she posits a partially ordering the modal base. Here, we should allow for a distinction between epistemic orderings of worlds based on how close to normal, stereotypical, probable, etc. (either as a matter of fact or relative to some body of information) and normative orderings of worlds based on how close to some normative ideal (whether ethical, prudential, teleological, bouletic, etc.) they are. In any case, the important idea is that such orderings can be used to select a set of sufficiently “favored” worlds in the modal base – i.e. the worlds in the modal base that are sufficiently highly ranked by the “ordering source”.

Her motivation for this is that, across the range of modal sentences in natural languages like English, background conditions seem capable of varying independently of the kind of modality at issue. So, we should represent them as two separate contextual variables in the content of modal sentences. If we do so, then the content of clauses deploying modal verbs like ‘might’, ‘must’, ‘may’, and ‘ought’ in widest scope can then be represented by determining what worlds are consistent with the relevant background conditions – i.e. what’s the implicit or explicit modal base? – and then determining how this modal base is ordered – i.e. which worlds in the modal base are sufficiently “favored” by the implicit or explicit ordering source? That is, we interpret a bare modal sentence *Mp* as a quantification – existential or universal – over the set of sufficiently favored worlds in the modal base. In the familiar way, if it is a possibility modal, we interpret the sentence as evaluating some prejacent proposition as true in *some* of these worlds; and, if it is a necessity modal, we interpret it as evaluating some prejacent proposition as true in *all* of these worlds.

Many linguists and philosophers of language find this hypothesis attractive for its systematicity and generality. It provides a systematic interpretation of many different modal words, used in many different ways, in many different kinds of contexts. For instance, Kratzer’s system can easily distinguish between normative and epistemic interpretations of must- and may-sentences, such as:

(2) Jerry must be there.

⁸ “The Notional Category of Modality”. See Paul Portner, *Modality*, ch. 3 for a more detailed exposition and argument that Kratzer’s system is superior to some of the alternatives that have been explored in theoretical linguistics. In what follows, I don’t follow her exact presentation, which suggests that the difference between normative and epistemic modals is a matter of the type of “modal base” – circumstantial or informational – and that epistemic ‘must’s and ‘may’s have an “empty ordering-source”. I think one can dispute both of these claims while nonetheless adopting her general framework, as I explain in Matthew Chrisman, *Normativity, Semantics, and the Expressive Roles of ‘Ought’*, ch. 6 of the manuscript.

(3) Jerry may be there.

On the normative readings, (2) will be interpreted as articulating something like requirement of some system of norms, and (3) will be interpreted as articulating something like a permission of some system of norms. In the framework just sketched, this can be captured by appealing to some normative standard as the ordering source. To a first approximation:

(2_n) Among the worlds consistent with the background conditions, in all of those worlds sufficiently favored by the relevant normative standard, Jerry is there.

(3_n) Among the worlds consistent with the background conditions, in some of those worlds sufficiently favored by the relevant normative standard, Jerry is there.

Typically the best interpretation of what someone is saying with a normative use of (2) and (3) would assume background conditions that comprise Jerry's *de facto* circumstances. However, it is not inconceivable that someone else's *de facto* circumstances are relevant (e.g. if Jerry is a cat and you are responsible for his whereabouts) or even someone's information (e.g. if Jerry is ignorant of certain facts and we're evaluating his options actions in light of what he knows or can know).⁹ And the relevant normative standards could be any that might plausibly be thought to require or permit Jerry to be there. Contextual clues and other knowledge will aid the audience in interpreting an utterance of (2) or (3) in terms of an implicit idea of some normative standard, but it could be, e.g. those set by some moral ideal, general principles of prudence, the laws of the land, the college regulations, some specific end Jerry or others might be pursuing, etc.

On the epistemic reading, in contrast, (2) will be interpreted as saying that some body of evidence conclusively supports a particular conclusion, and (3) will be interpreted as saying that some body of evidence does not rule out a particular conclusion. In the framework sketched above, this can be captured by appealing to some epistemic standard as the ordering source. To a first approximation:

(2_e) Among the worlds consistent with the background conditions, in all of those worlds sufficiently favored by the relevant epistemic standard, Jerry is here.

(3_e) Among the worlds consistent with the background conditions, in some of those worlds sufficiently favored by the relevant epistemic standard, Jerry is here.

In virtually all cases, the best interpretation of what someone is saying with an epistemic use of (2) and (3) would assume background conditions that comprise someone's (possible) informational state. This will typically be the speaker's evidence or the information the speaker and audience are taking for granted as known in the relevant conversational context. However, it is conceivable that the relevant informational state is someone else's (e.g. if the sentence were appended with "In light of what Suzy knows..." it would be Suzy's informational state that was

⁹ Kratzer, suggests otherwise, but I agree with Wedgwood, *The Nature of Normativity*, pp. 124-25, "The Meaning of 'Ought'", p. 154, Gunnar Björnsson and Stephen Finlay, "Metaethical Contextualism Defended", and Janice Dowell, "Contextualist Solutions to Three Puzzles About Practical Conditionals" that there are cases (like those due originally to Frank Jackson, "On the Semantics and Logic of Obligation") where the most plausible interpretation of what someone means requires understanding a normative modal as restricted by an informational rather than circumstantial modal base. See also Niko Kolodny and John MacFarlane, "Ifs and Oughts" for an alternative way of interpreting normative ought-sentences as conditional on informational modal bases.

relevant for interpreting the sentence, or if it were appended with “According to the newspaper reports...” it would be the information contained in the newspaper reports).¹⁰ And the relevant epistemic standards could be any that might plausibly be thought, in light of the relevant information, to conclusively support (‘must’) or not rule out (‘may’) the conclusion that Jerry is there.¹¹ Again, contextual clues and other knowledge will aid the audience in interpreting an utterance of (2) or (3) in terms of an implicit idea of these standards, but they could be based on normality, stereotypicality, probability, etc.

The important thing to notice about (2_n)/(3_n) and (2_e)/(3_e) is how similar they are. In fact, they are exactly the same, except for the fact that the relevant background conditions and ordering sources are set differently. In this way, this possible worlds framework provides for a satisfyingly unified account of the semantics contribution of normative and epistemic ‘must’s and ‘may’s. There is no need to posit ambiguity in the words themselves to explain in a completely general way how we get so many different possible readings of sentences deploying modal auxiliaries.

This is important for several reasons. First, a unified account helps to explain why the same lexical items, with the same grammatical restrictions, are used to make epistemic and normative modal claims both in English and *mutatis mutandis* in other languages. Second, a unified account aids in our understanding of the compositional structure of our language, which is crucial for providing a plausible explanation of how language learners come to learn their first language and how audiences can understand novel sentences. Third, a unified account is elegant in the way that it explains complex data with a simple number of assumptions, which gives it some claim to be onto to something more fundamental about modal concepts than competing accounts.

Can this possible worlds framework help us to account better for the three linguistic facts about the meaning of the word ‘ought’ that above I argued cause problems for naïve applications of realism and expressivism to this word? I think it can definitely help us to make progress, but compared to the words ‘must’, ‘may’, and ‘might’, semanticists have given relatively little attention to the word ‘ought’, and I believe its semantic role in the broader system of modal auxiliaries is not well understood.

The main challenge for applying the possible worlds framework to the meaning of ‘ought’ is to understand how it relates semantically to other modals like ‘must’ and ‘may’. For a sentence like

(1) Jerry ought to be there.

is clearly weaker than (2) but stronger than (3):

(2) Jerry must be there.

(3) Jerry may be there.

All of these sentences admit of multiple readings, yet on each reading they seem to be systematically related in terms of semantic strength. Since the possible worlds framework deploys an essentially two-way distinction between necessity and possibility modals, which are modeled in the semantics with universal and

¹⁰ Compare the modification in Kratzer, “The Notional Category of Modality Again”.

¹¹ Again (see footnote 8 above), this is different from Kratzer’s exact proposal in that it treats epistemic modals bases as ordered by epistemic standards rather than determined in part by whatever epistemic standards attempt to track (laws of nature, probability, etc.) and then ordered by an empty ordering source. In this way, I believe achieves more semantic similarity between epistemic and normative uses of ‘must’ and ‘may’. However, structurally, it is very much akin to her proposal.

existential quantifications, it may seem implausible that it could capture the apparently three-way semantic distinction between sentences like (1)-(3).

Because of this, Kai von Fintel and Sabine Iatridou¹² propose to enrich the Kratzerian framework for interpreting modal auxiliaries by adding a “secondary” ordering source to the original account. Hence, they suggest that ‘must’ is a universal quantifier over the set of worlds in the modal base which are sufficiently favored by the “primary” ordering source. However, they view ‘ought’ as a universal quantifier over the set of worlds in the modal base which are sufficiently favored by both the primary ordering source and some secondary ordering source. As they put the intuitive idea, “We think that a sentence like *You ought to do the dishes* means not that among the favored worlds, most are worlds where you do the dishes. Rather, it means that among the favored worlds, all the very best ones are worlds where you do the dishes”.¹³

Formally, this captures the idea that ‘ought’ is logically weaker than ‘must’ because, in their view, any particular token of ‘ought’ quantifies universally over a proper subset of the worlds, over which the correlative token of ‘must’ would quantify. For example, what one must do, according to some standard, is whatever one does in all of the worlds sufficiently favored by that standard. By contrast, what one ought to do is whatever one does in all of the worlds in the subset of those worlds, which are considered “very best” by some further standard.

One might reasonably worry, however, that this is *ad hoc*. After all, Kratzer’s original distinction between contextual relativity to a modal base and contextual relativity to an ordering source is motivated by considerations applying to all modal auxiliaries and the way these interact with context of use, whereas von Fintel and Iatridou’s distinction between primary and secondary ordering sources appears to be motivated by consideration of ‘ought’ alone, and so it looks like a formal patch rather than a deep explanation of the semantic weakness of ‘ought’ compared to ‘must’. Moreover, their strategy faces difficulties with the epistemic ‘ought’ and ‘must’, where notions like being “very best” among the “favored” worlds seem out of place, since, in the epistemic case, these modals seem to evaluate the relative probability of something. That is, epistemic ought-sentences seem to say that something is probably true, while epistemic must-sentences seem to say that something is guaranteed to be true.

Finlay seeks to incorporate this intuition by treating ‘must’ as evaluating the probability of some prejacent proposition, conditional on some contextually determined body of evidence. It is interpreted as assigning a conditional probability of 1 to this proposition. Then, he treats ‘ought’ as evaluating the comparative probability of some prejacent proposition, conditional on some contextually determined body of evidence. It is interpreted as saying that this probability is greater than the probability of some range of relevant alternatives. Hence, on their epistemic readings, he would say that (2) evaluates the conditional probability of Jerry’s being there as equal to 1, while (1) says that this probability is greater than some range of relevant alternatives.

In spite of its appeal to probabilities rather than possibilities, this proposal should be viewed as a modification of rather than an alternative to the original possible worlds framework for explaining the meaning of the epistemic ‘must’ and ‘ought’. For on it, we can view must-sentences as saying that some prejacent proposition is true in all of the possible worlds within a certain range, while ought-

¹² "How to Say *Ought* in Foreign: The Composition of Weak Necessity Modals".

¹³ *ibid.*, p. 118.

sentences say that the prejacent proposition is true in a greater proportion of the worlds in that range than any of the relevant alternatives.¹⁴ If we do so, I think this becomes an attractive proposal for explaining the relationship between the *epistemic* 'must' and 'ought' within the basic possible worlds framework.¹⁵

But what about all of the normative uses of 'ought' and 'must'? These were the uses of 'ought' that originally animate the metaethical debate about the meaning of 'ought'. However, above we observed that each of these modal words get one lexical entry rather than many. In his published papers as well as book chapters in draft, Finlay seeks to develop a rigorous and linguistically sensitive strategy for integrating the normative uses of 'ought' into the probabilistic semantics he offers for epistemic 'ought'. His core idea, as I understand it, is to interpret all normative 'ought's (as well as 'must's and 'may's) as explicitly or implicitly teleological. That is, he treats them as semantically related to some end. Then, they can be seen as evaluating the probability that some means is taken, conditional on the assumption that the end is achieved (as well as other background conditions).

This hypothesis (with a few complications that I won't get into here) predicts an impressive array of semantic phenomena having to do with 'ought's which are either explicitly or implicitly teleological. However, I doubt that Finlay is right to think that all normative ought-claims are teleological. Some normative ought-sentences, which seem to me to be intelligible sentences of English, also seem to me to be *purely* moral, evaluative, or bouletic and not implicitly teleological. For instance, it is hard to know how to plausibly paraphrase in teleological terms the very statement of high-level moral claims ("One ought to maximize happiness" or "One ought to be moral") as well as claims about doing things for their own sakes (e.g. "One ought not pursue evil for its own sake"). That is not to say that these claims are true, but as long as they are intelligible sentences of English, the ways I can imagine to paraphrase them in terms of some implicit end seem at best forced and at worst *ad hoc*. As Finlay's attempts to convince us otherwise are still work in progress, it would be inappropriate to discuss them in more detail here. Instead, I would like to sketch a third proposal for locating 'ought' between 'must' and 'may' within the possible worlds framework.

As we saw above, Kratzer's treatment of necessity modals like 'must' turns on a partial ordering of the modal base. This could be an ordering based on what is "favored" by some normative standard such as morality, prudence, efficacy to some end, or satisfaction of someone's preferences, but it could also be an ordering based on what is "favored" by some epistemic standard such as what is most probable or stereotypical. In order to fit 'ought' into this framework, we might distinguish between two ways a standard can be thought of as "favoring" something.¹⁶ The basic idea is that, where 'must' is concerned, the relevant standards are thought of as *requiring* something, whereas, where 'ought' is

¹⁴ This interpretation accords with the way Finlay (personal communication) wants to flesh out his own proposal. See also *Confusion of Tongues: A Theory of Normativity*, ch. 4 of the manuscript.

¹⁵ A reviewer worries that one can reasonably make an epistemic must-claim without assigning probability 1 to the relevant prejacent proposition, conditional on the relevant evidence. Perhaps that is right; it's going to depend on what counts as the relevant evidence for Finlay's proposal. Even so, I believe his proposal could be tweaked by appealing to a high threshold rather than maximal probability.

¹⁶ Compare Matthew Chrisman and Michael Ridge, "'Ought' and 'Must'" for discussion of a proposal of this basic shape and potential refinements in light of difficulties with the possible worlds semantics, some of which are discussed below.

concerned, the relevant standards are thought of as *recommending* something but not requiring it. After all, to say “You must do X”, in the right context with the appropriate authority, is a way of requiring someone to do X. Similarly, to say “You ought to do X”, in the right context with the appropriate authority is a way of recommending that someone do X. The idea is that some standards favor things by requiring them, while other standards favor things by recommending them.

If we apply this modification to the possible worlds glosses of (2)-(3) we get, as a first approximation:

- (2') Among the worlds consistent with the background conditions, in all of those worlds favored by the relevant requirements, Jerry is there.
- (3') Among the worlds consistent with the background conditions, in some of those worlds favored by the relevant requirements, Jerry is there.

And this helps us to distinguish (2) from (1), which we can now gloss as:

- (1') Among the worlds consistent with the background conditions, in all of those worlds favored by the relevant *recommendations*, Jerry is there.

Then, to capture the difference between normative and epistemic readings of each of these sentences, we can appeal to different kinds of ordering sources. The standards of normative systems such as morality, prudence, efficacy to some end, etc. can be thought of as comprising both requirements and recommendations of actions and states of affairs. By contrast, the standards of epistemology can be thought of as comprising both requirements and recommendations of what to believe (or what conditional probabilities to assign) given contextually determined bodies of evidence. Intuitively, requiring and recommending are two different ways someone or something can call for something. And when standards call for something, they are reasonable standards only if they treat what is called for in the requiring-way as also called for in the recommending-way but not vice versa. This is how this proposal funds the idea that ‘ought’ is like ‘must’ but weaker across many different flavors of both words.

This is a third proposal within the possible worlds framework for articulating the semantic contribution of ‘ought’. It too is open to challenge. For example, it may seem wrong to think of *standards* as requiring/recommending things, since these notions are more at home in understanding the speech-acts of particular *individuals*. Or one may worry that it is only slightly more explanatory than von Fintel and Iatridou’s appeal to a secondary ordering source. Be that as it may, I think it is relatively clear that all of the three proposals for using the possible worlds framework for thinking about the semantic contribution of ‘ought’ illustrate the considerable room for maneuver within this framework, which is ultimately why this framework will have a much easier time with the three linguistic facts that we saw to be problematic for the realist and expressivist views of the meaning of ‘ought’ adumbrated above.

3. THE THREE LINGUISTIC FACTS AGAIN AND FURTHER DISSATISFACTION

The first linguistic fact was that we apply ‘ought’ to things other than actions that are obligatory or commendable. By treating ‘ought’ as always and everywhere a modal operator, we can explain uses that are not directed at some action. We just need to come up with the right prejacent proposition. For example, a sentence like “Jamie ought to feel more sympathy for the bereaved” can be interpreted as saying that

Jamie does feel more sympathy for the bereaved in all of some range of possible worlds (e.g. the worlds favored by the recommendations of morality). Similarly, an overtly teleological sentence such as “In order to murder someone messily, you ought to use a chainsaw” can be interpreted as saying that you do use a chainsaw in all of some range of possible worlds (e.g. those where you achieve the end of murdering messily in the method recommended by efficiency). Non-agential ‘ought’s like “Grandfather clocks ought to chime at noon” can also be interpreted as saying that grandfather clocks do chime at noon in all of some range of possible worlds (e.g. the worlds recommended by the preferences of the designers of grandfather clocks). And a sentence like “There ought to be perpetual world peace” can be interpreted as saying that there is perpetual world peace in all of some range of possible worlds (e.g. those recommended by a morality of pacificism).

The second linguistic fact had to do with the difference between normative and epistemic readings of certain ought-sentences. This is not problematic on any applications of the possible worlds framework sketched above, since they all provide principled way to distinguish normative and epistemic readings of an ambiguous modal sentence – this has to do with the type of standards provide the partial ordering of the modal base.¹⁷

Finally, the third linguistic fact was that ‘ought’ appears to exist as part of a broader system of modal verbs which is manifested in English and other languages. This is why it receives one complex entry rather than multiple distinct entries in good English dictionaries. By working towards a systematic and motivated application of the general possible worlds framework to the word ‘ought’, I believe we clearly move closer to integrating our understanding of the semantic contribution of ‘ought’ into the more general system of English modal verbs.

In spite of the unity of the proposal and the fact that it easily explains the three facts that were problematic for our initial applications of realism and expressivism to ‘ought’, I suspect many metaethicists will be dissatisfied with the possible worlds semantics for ‘ought’. They might be inclined, that is, to object to the discussion above by saying something like the following: “Look, what we’re interested in is the meaning of the all-things-considered practical ‘ought’ – that is, the concept expressed by the word ‘ought’ when one deliberates and asks oneself what one ought to do. This is clearly a relational idea having something to do with the idea of an agent having an obligation to act in some way or at least with the idea of an agent having compelling reasons for and against various courses of action.”

Because of this, they may react to the suggestion that a possible worlds semantics can explain linguistic facts about ‘ought’ that realists and expressivists explain so poorly by saying something like this: “Maybe the meaning of some or all of the other uses of the ‘ought’ in English can be explained in terms of universal quantifications over contextually determined sets of possible worlds, but the practical or ‘deliberative’ use is special. It has to do with agents and actions and not possible worlds.” In light of all of the uses of ‘ought’ that clearly aren’t special in this

¹⁷ I don’t mean to suggest that all of the linguistic facts having to do with the difference between epistemic and normative modals can be explained by appeal to types of implicit ordering sources. As several linguists have stressed, there are interesting differences in the way epistemic and normative modals scope with quantification, tense, and aspect. These call out for an explanation that I believe requires something more than different ordering sources. Some linguists attempt to do this outside the possible worlds framework (see especially F. R. Palmer, *Mood and Modality*) but others have argued that these facts can be explained by systematic augmentations of the possible worlds framework (see especially Valentine Hacquard, “On the Event Relativity of Modal Auxiliaries”).

way, perhaps these metaethicists will just say, “We’re going to have to agree that ‘ought’ is ambiguous between the sense that semanticists are interested in, which integrates more or less neatly with the other modal auxiliaries in English, and the sense that we care about in metaethics, which has something to do with obligations or practical reasons.”

Although there is, in my view, a lot that is wrong with this line of response, I don’t think the sense of dissatisfaction with the possible worlds framework it expresses is completely wrong, just misplaced. Let me first explain what I think is wrong and then explain how I think the possible worlds semantics for ‘ought’ we’ve developed so far invites further discussion among metaethicists and semanticists.

It seems pretty clear to me that ‘ought’ is a word of English, whose grammatical properties, etymological history, developmental profile, and semantic connections to words in other languages are subject to systematic linguistic investigation. Because of this, it’s not legitimate for philosophers to suggest that a word like this is ambiguous unless they provide evidence answering to the broad constraints in linguistic theory used to determine whether the lexicon for English deserves one or more entries for a word. It is by no means uncontroversial what these constraints are or how they work out in particular cases; however, the case for thinking that ‘ought’ is ambiguous between deliberative and non-deliberative senses is weak.¹⁸ The facts that the same sign-design is used for both “senses” in many other languages and that must-sentences seem to systematically entail ought-sentences, which in turn seem to systematically entail may-sentences – across the deliberative/non-deliberative divide – strongly encourage us to find one complex rule for modeling the semantic contribution of the word ‘ought’ rather than two or more.

Some will want to switch to talk of concepts instead of words. That is, they’ll suggest that metaethicists should give up on developing a semantics for normative *words* like ‘ought’ and focus on something like the nature and content of the *concept* expressed by the all-things-considered normative ‘ought’. Even if the word ‘ought’ is not plausibly claimed to be ambiguous, that doesn’t mean that this word always expresses the same concept.

That may be right (though it does raise tricky questions about the relation between words and concepts and why a non-ambiguous word expresses two different concepts). However, theorizing in both ethics and semantics seeks reflective equilibrium based in large part on input from ordinary intuition, and this input comes couched in language using mostly ordinary words like ‘ought’ and not neologisms like ‘all things considered normative “ought”’. So, even if metaethicists are most interested in the logic of our concepts rather than the meanings of our words, and these are projects kept at arm’s length, I still think they should seek to integrate their account of the relevant concepts with a full understanding of the best

¹⁸ Like I said above, I think there is room for reasonable debate about whether ‘ought’ manifests an epistemic/normative ambiguity, though my reading of the relevant literature inclines me to doubt there is ambiguity even here. However, the suggestion mooted above that ‘ought’ is ambiguous between deliberative and non-deliberative senses is importantly different. The only linguistic case for it that I know of is due to Mark Schroeder, “Oughts, Agents, and Actions”, who argues that ‘ought’ evokes different syntactic structures (control-verb vs. raising-verb structures) depending on whether it carries a deliberative or non-deliberative sense. I believe this argument fails for reasons I outline in Chrisman, “‘Ought’ and Control”. I won’t recapitulate these here except to say that there are intuitive and independently motivated linguistic tests for control-verb syntax that ‘ought’ never passes.

linguistic theories of the meaning of the words used to express them. And this is precisely what the possible worlds semantics purports to offer.

Nonetheless, I think we should recognize that the possible worlds framework for explaining the semantics of 'ought' *qua* modal operator is open to a difficult objection. One of the main moving part of its machinery is the idea of a proposition's being true in a possible world. This is what we get from using the standard semantic model for alethic modal logic as the basis of a Kratzerian semantics for natural language modals, which we have here extended to cover 'ought'. However, in some ways, this machinery seems to be too coarse-grained, since inclusion in a possible world is usually thought to be closed under logical entailment while many uses of 'ought' clearly are not.

Ross's paradox¹⁹ highlight's this well. Although every possible world where you mail the letter is a possible world where you mail the letter or burn it, that doesn't mean that the sentence "You ought to mail the letter" entails the sentence "You ought to mail the letter or burn it," as the possible worlds semantics seems to imply. Why not? Because being obligated to (or having a reason to) mail the letter is different from being obligated to (or having a reason to) mail the letter or burn it. There are pragmatic strategies for addressing this problem, but these seem to miss the point that reasons and obligations, and so at least some 'ought's, attach to agents acting rather than propositions.^{20,21}

Does this mean that 'ought' is ambiguous after all – having some senses where it says what's true in all of some set of possible worlds and having other senses where it says that some agent is obligated (or has most reason) to act in some way? I don't think so. All of the reasons against positing ambiguity remain. Moreover, we observe something like Ross's paradox with epistemic 'ought's too. Just because every possible world where the storm hits shore before midnight is a possible world where the storm hits shore before midnight or veers off course, that doesn't mean that the sentence "The storm ought to hit shore before midnight" entails the sentence "The storm ought to hit shore before midnight or veer off course."

So, I think the problem here indicates not that 'ought' is ambiguous between deliberative and non-deliberative meanings after all but that the idea of a

¹⁹ Alf Ross, "Imperatives and Logic".

²⁰ The pragmatic strategies are also questionable on independent grounds. See Fabrizio Cariani, "'Ought' and Resolution Semantics" and Chrisman, *Normativity, Semantics, and the Expressive Roles of 'Ought'*, ch.6 of the manuscript, for further internal objections to the strategies.

²¹ Related structural problems with the possible worlds strategy are highlighted by the possibility of strong all-things-considered practical dilemmas; these are cases where we might think that sentences of the form "A ought to ϕ " and "A ought not to ϕ " are both true and not because implicitly relativized to different standards. For useful early discussions of this problem, see E. J. Lemmon, "Moral Dilemmas" and Bas van Fraassen, "Values and the Heart's Command". For more recent discussion within a possible worlds framework, see Eric Swanson, "On the Treatment of Incomparability in Ordering Semantics and Premise Semantics" and Alex Silk, "Modality, Weights, and Inconsistent Premise Sets". Similar problems arise when the possible worlds semantics for 'ought' is combined with certain popular views of the semantics for conditionals. For example, any view like Kratzer's seems to imply counterintuitively that sentences of the form "If you're going to ϕ , then you ought to ϕ " are always true. For further discussion of this problem, see A. Frank, "Context Dependence in Modal Constructions", Zsófia Zvolenszky, "Is a Possible-Worlds Semantics of Modality Possible?", and Fabrice Nauze, "Modality in Typological Perspective", §4.3.2.

proposition's being true in a possible world is too blunt of a tool to fully explain the way in which 'ought' functions semantically. This tool is useful for developing a semantic model for alethic modal logic, and its flexibility helps tremendously in unifying the different flavors of various modal sentences, but when it comes to modal auxiliaries of a natural language like English, it looks like we may need a more delicate tool. This is not the appropriate place to try to develop such a tool in any detail, but we remain I think within the basic spirit of the possible worlds framework by continuing to view words like 'must', 'may', and 'ought' as sentential operators affecting the modality of the clause in which they take widest scope but allowing that the sentences on which they operate may be event-descriptions or state-descriptions, and recognizing that the logical properties of these differ in ways not captured by the idea of a proposition's being true in a possible world. For example, the event of your mailing the letter is plausibly thought to be distinct from the event of your mailing the letter or burning it; and we can easily imagine a moral standard calling for the former event but not for the latter event. Similarly, the event of the storm's hitting shore before midnight is plausibly thought to be distinct from the event of the storm's hitting shore before midnight or veering off course; and we can easily imagine an epistemic standard calling for different probability assignments to these two events.

If this is right, we should still view 'ought' univocally, as a modal operator, whose semantic function in particular sentences depends on contextually determined background conditions and what is called for by contextually determined standards. This is what allowed the possible worlds semantics for 'ought' to explain the three linguistic facts we started with and so it should be retained in any future analysis. But we should also allow for a more nuanced view of the entailments of particular ought-claims, especially those involving an operation on an event-description.

If I'm right about the availability of more delicate tools that are, in their basic operation, structurally similar to quantification over contextually determined sets of possible worlds, then the one important place for dissatisfaction with the possible worlds semantics for 'ought' is not in its failure to capture a special practical of "deliberative" sense of 'ought' whose meaning is wholly different from other uses of 'ought' but rather in the level of nuance with which the moving parts of the theory are developed. As we develop these better, there will continue to be strong reason to treat the word 'ought' as some kind of univocal sentential operator whose semantic function is not, in the first instance, to describe obligations nor to express moral attitudes – as realism and expressivism seemed to imply – but to affect the modality of a sentence. This is the important lesson that theoretical semantics has to teach metaethics regarding the meaning of the word 'ought'.

4. A NEW PERSPECTIVE ON THE REALISM-EXPRESSIVISM DEBATE

As I set things up above, the possible worlds semantics for 'ought' (or some descendant of it) seems to be a competitor to the basic semantic ideas in realism and expressivism; and, as such, it comes out looking a lot more unified and flexible, which speaks powerfully in its favor. However, I think many realists will see this as ultimately supportive of their view. After all, the initial suggestion that ought sentences describe obligations was clearly naïve in the face of all of the different possible uses of this word. But now, with something like the possible worlds strategy on the table, couldn't we retool realism to take advantage of the unity and

power of that approach? And once we do so, doesn't that mean that the possible worlds semantics generates truth-conditions for ought-claims, and that these truth conditions articulate the features of reality these sentences describe? That is, isn't the unity and flexibility of the sort of semantics we have been discussing a further nail in the coffin of expressivism?

I don't think so. I think it's right that the possible worlds semantics generates truth-conditions for ought-claims made in context. And clearly a realist interpretation on these truth-conditions is available, i.e. one that treats them as articulations of the features of reality described by ought-claims. However, anyone who has followed recent metaethical debate will recognize this doesn't by itself make the possible worlds semantics off-limits to expressivists. For, although some expressivists have denied that ought-claims have truth-conditions, most contemporary expressivists do not deny this; rather they argue that the assignment of truth-conditions to normative sentences leaves deeper questions unanswered about why it is that these sentences have the truth-conditions that they do. For example, here's Simon Blackburn's central characterization of expressivism in *Ruling Passions*, where he embraces the idea that normative sentences express propositions, which will determine truth conditions, but he insists that,

This strategy – that of expressivism – leaves normative ... propositions alone with their own specific identities. They are the counters in our transactions with our values, just as a piece of money is a counter in financial transactions. To understand the value of a piece of money ... [i]t is necessary to understand the process of human economic behaviour. Similarly, to understand the normative proposition, it is no good looking for a 'concept' or a 'truth-condition'. We need the same eye for whole processes of human action and interaction.²²

I think this is not meant as a rejection of truth-conditionalist approaches to modeling the compositional structure of our language, which are popular in theoretical semantics. Rather, I read Blackburn as holding that the best accounts of the compositional structure of the meanings of our language will leave it open what makes it true that this or that part of our language fits a particular semantic model. And it is there, in response to a question that he describes as "external" to the project compositional semantics,²³ that his expressivism is meant to provide an alternative to realism.

How does this work with something like a possible worlds semantics for ought-sentences? I think Blackburn's suggestion would be to go ahead and treat ought-sentences as having whatever truth-conditions the best compositional semantics says they have, but then he would argue that the best account of why they have those truth-conditions is not one that appeals to ostensible ought-facts in the world that these sentences purport to describe but rather to the nonrepresentational mental states these sentences are used to express in normal human action and interaction.

To see how this might work in a little more detail, consider again,

(1) Jerry ought to be there.

used in a context which forces a normative rather than epistemic reading. Let's assume that our best semantics says that this claim has the following truth-conditions:

Among the worlds consistent with the background conditions, in all of those worlds favored by the relevant recommendations, Jerry is there.

²² p. 50.

²³ Compare Blackburn, *Spreading the Word*, p. 11.

If a realist interprets these truth-conditions as an articulations of the way the world must be in order to make (1) true, then an expressivist interprets these truth-conditions as an articulation of what one must be for in order to utter (1) felicitously; one must be for a system of norms that, relative to the background conditions, recommend Jerry's being there.

In this way, the possible worlds semantics for modal auxiliaries is understood as answering a different kind of question from the question at dispute between descriptivists and expressivists. More specifically, I am suggesting that the possible worlds semantics answers a question about how best to characterize the semantic contribution modals make to the overall propositional (or truth conditional) content of the sentences in which they figure, whereas realism and expressivism should be viewed as competing answers to a deeper "metasemantic" question about what it is in virtue of which particular kinds of words have the semantic contents that they do.²⁴ A realist says that the target vocabulary makes the semantic contribution that it does in virtue of some word-world descriptive relation, while an expressivist says that the target vocabulary makes the semantic contribution that it does in virtue of some word-idea expressive relation.

Another way to put this is in terms of the distinction sometimes made between "semantic theories" and "foundational theories of meaning".²⁵ The former seek a way to generate systematic assignments of semantic contents to arbitrary strings in a language, while the latter seek an explanation of why a language has the meanings that it has (or, relatedly, what it is for a particular community to speak and understand a language with these meanings). In light of this distinction, I think we can see the possible worlds framework for explaining the meaning of modal auxiliaries as part of a semantic theory for English (and extendable to other languages), whereas I think realism and expressivism are best seen as competing accounts of a particular aspect of the foundational theory of meaning.

We can of course claim – as a further commitment in the foundational theory of meaning – that modal words mean what they do, in virtue of putative word-world descriptive relations. As we have seen, that would make for a more sophisticated version of realism about 'ought'. However, if the possible worlds account semantics is correct, then 'ought' is like '□' in that it is semantic contribution most perspicuously modeled as a sentential operator like the '¬' in sentential logic; and it can be modeled in terms of a universal quantification like the '∀x' of the predicate calculus. And, as far as our foundational theory of meaning is concerned, I think it remains an open question whether we should say that '□', '¬', and '∀x' mean what they do in virtue of referring to some property (e.g. necessity, negativity and allness?), which some sentences and predicates have and others do not. Although some philosophers may think such ontological commitments are the only way to avail ourselves of the truth-conditional accounts of the systematic contributions made by logical words to the overall semantic content of the sentences in which they figure,²⁶ I think the distinction between semantic theory and foundational theory of meaning can help us to see some alternatives.

²⁴ Compare Jussi Suikkanen, "Metaethics, Semantics, and Metasemantics", for a similar idea.

²⁵ For inspiration for this distinction, see David Lewis, "General Semantics", p. 19 and Jeff Speaks, "Theories of Meaning", §1.

²⁶ I suspect this is part of the reason Wedgwood claims that the semantic value of 'ought' is in general a "property of a proposition", see Wedgwood, "The Meaning of 'Ought'", p. 54, *The Nature of Normativity*, p. 99.

As we have learned from debates about alethic modality, explaining the semantic contribution of words such as 'necessarily' and 'possibly' (and their formalizations in modal logic) in terms of universal and existential quantification over sets of possible worlds leaves many interesting questions about the epistemology and ontology of modality open. For this reason, most philosophers today will inter-substitute talk of alethic necessity or possibility with talk of what's true in all or some possible worlds. But there is still considerable debate about whether (and if so in what way) possible worlds exist, and whether statements about possible worlds mean what they do in virtue of their word-world relations or for some other reason.²⁷

In this context, I think there is ample space to develop a new and more linguistically sophisticated version of expressivism. For example, given that 'ought' is a modal operator, one might endorse a form of expressivism about modal notions quite generally. The idea would be to insist that all modal operators mean what they do not in virtue of some putative word-world descriptive relation but in virtue of some word-idea expressive relation they stand in to certain kinds of nonrepresentational mental states. Alternatively, one might continue to endorse the possible worlds semantics but seek a still more nuanced form of expressivism which located the facts in virtue of which some uses of 'ought' (those classically thought of as not genuinely normative) have the propositional content that they do in word-world descriptive relations, while other uses of 'ought' (those classically thought to be genuinely normative) are said to have the propositional content that they do in virtue of certain word-idea expressive relations.

I don't mean to endorse any of the realist or expressivist views here. Rather I simply want to point out that, unlike the naïve versions of realism and expressivism about 'ought' with which I started, all of these more sophisticated views are consistent with the sort of semantic framework for modal auxiliaries developed above. This is why I think it's wrong to think the unity and flexibility of that semantic framework tells ultimately in favor of a realist rather than an expressivist view, as long as we conceive of these as competing metasemantic views.

5. A THIRD WAY?

So far in this paper I have urged that treating 'ought' as sentential operator whose semantic function is not, in the first instance, to describe obligations nor to express moral attitudes, but rather to affect the modality of a judgment. This is because I think this provides a better account of a number of linguistic facts about the diversity of uses of 'ought' in ordinary English than naïve applications of realist and expressivist views about the meaning of normative terms. However, I have also suggested that viewing realism and expressivism as competitors to the possible worlds semantics conflates an issue in semantic theory with an issue in the foundational theory of meaning (or "metasemantics"). By viewing realism and expressivism not as different views about the semantic contribution of 'ought' but as different views about why it is that this word (and others) has the semantic value that it has, I believe we begin to usefully reorient metaethical debate about the meaning of this term. In light of this reorientation, something like the possible worlds framework could be common ground for pursuing the question of whether

²⁷ Compare John Divers, "Modal Commitments", and Amie Thomasson, "Modal Normativism and the Methods of Metaphysics".

'ought' functions semantically as a necessity modal because it stands in some putative word-world relation with something like properties of prejacent sentences or because it stands in some word-idea expressive relation with nonrepresentational mental states it conventionally expresses. In my view, we shouldn't see proponents of these views as disagreeing about the correct semantics for ought-sentences, we should rather see them as disagreeing about what it is in virtue of which these sentences have the semantic content that they have.

However, once we have reoriented the metaethical debate about the meaning of 'ought' in this way, I also believe a third option at the level of the fundamental theory of meaning comes into view. This is a form of inferentialism. At a minimum, inferentialism is the view that *logical* words mean what they do in virtue of the word-word (or, what is treated essentially the same, idea-idea) inferential commitments they can be used to "make explicit".²⁸ This idea is most straightforward when it comes to the conditional. Everyone should agree that, when we think there are inferential connections between terms like 'bachelor' and 'male', we can make our commitment to these explicit by saying "If S is a bachelor, then S is a male". The inferentialist's strategy is to turn this commonplace into an account of why logical terms like 'if...then' mean what they do – that is, into a part of what I've called the foundational theory of meaning. The basic thought is that these words mean what they do in virtue of their role in making explicit our commitment such word-word inferential relations – rather than in virtue of putative word-world descriptive relations or putative word-idea expressive relations.²⁹

When it comes to modal words, inspired by Kant and others,³⁰ inferentialists typically view a term like 'necessarily' as itself an essentially logical word. The basic claim, I take it, is that the word 'necessarily' means what it does not in virtue of some word-world descriptive relation (e.g. that of describing a proposition as being true in all of some set of possible worlds), nor in virtue of some word-idea expressive relation (e.g. that of expressing a strong propensity to think of things in a particular way), but rather in virtue of the sorts of word-word inferential relations, commitment to which it can be used to articulate or "make explicit".³¹ For instance, to say, "Necessarily, water is H₂O" one is, on this view, making explicit a

²⁸ Robert Brandom is the best-known contemporary proponent of this view. See *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment*, ch. 2, *Articulating Reasons: An Introduction to Inferentialism*, ch. 1-3, *Between Saying and Doing*, ch. 4.

²⁹ To be more precise, inferentialists typically see word-word (or idea-idea) inferential relations as abstractions from more basic sentence-sentence (or thought-thought) inferential relations. Here I am suppressing this detail as well as any attempt to explain where such inferential relations "come from" in order to state just enough of an inferentialist account to make the contrast with expressivism and descriptivism visible.

³⁰ Kant treats modality not as part of the empirical content of a judgment but as part of the form of the judgment (see Immanuel Kant, *Kritik Der Reinen Vernunft*, A74/B99-100). Inspired by this, Sellars claims that "our judgments to the effect that A causally necessitates B as the expression of a rule governing our use of the terms 'A' and 'B'" in "Language, Rules, and Behavior", p. 136; see also his "Counterfactuals, Dispositions, and the Causal Modalities". Ryle makes a similar suggestion that modal notions (e.g. what must or may be true, given certain conditions) are analogous to the notion of a conditional in being best understood as meaning what they do in virtue of their explicating logical role of being "inference tickets". See "'If', 'So', and 'Because'".

³¹ Compare Brandom, *Between Saying and Doing*, pp. 95-105.

commitment to a policy of making and allowing/enforcing certain inferences to and from counterfactual claims.

If the lessons of §1-3 of this paper are right and 'ought' functions semantically as a sentential modal operator, then maybe we can extend the inferentialist idea to explain why 'ought' has the semantic value that this semantics predicts. Brandom's own proposal is that "Normative vocabulary plays the same expressive role on the *practical* side that *conditionals* do on the *theoretical* side."³² Hence, he sees 'ought' as meaning what it does in virtue of its role in making explicit commitments to the goodness of inferences from doxastic premises (beliefs) to practical conclusions (intentions). For example, one might think that repeating some gossip would harm someone, to no purpose, and so conclude not to repeat the gossip. Brandom suggests that we can make explicit our commitment to the goodness of this inference with something like the claim "One ought not do something which would harm someone, to no purpose."³³

However, I believe it is a mistake to treat 'ought' as always making explicit our commitment to the goodness of practical inferences. To do so ignores what was highlighted with the first two linguistic facts about 'ought' presented in §1: not all uses of 'ought' in English attach to commendable or obligatory actions. Some attach to nonactions like attitudes of sympathy, others attach to states of affairs which are thought to be ideal or likely, and still others attach to actions that do not seem to be commendable or obligatory in any way. Moreover, Brandom's proposal ignores the semantic difference between 'ought' and 'must'. This is why I think it is better to treat 'ought' as exhibiting a semantic flexibility more akin to a weak form of 'necessarily'.

If this is right, an inferentialist could agree with the upshot of §2-3 that something like the possible worlds account provides the most perspicuous representation of the systematic contribution of modal auxiliaries to the semantic content of the sentences in which they figure. But then he would interpret this as a further articulation of the fine structure of the various inferential commitments made explicit by modal words. More specifically, if something like the semantics for 'ought' I developed in §3 is right, then an inferentialist could say that 'ought' means what it does in virtue of its role in articulating a commitment to a word-word inferential connections linking the recommendations of some standard to the truth of some prejacent sentence. I believe this represents the beginning of a new account of the meaning of ought-sentences that deserves a place beside realism and expressivism on the menu of accounts of why these sentences mean what they do.

By paying closer attention to detailed issues about how to work out the semantics for 'ought', I think we usefully reorient metaethical debate about the meaning of this word in two ways. First, we see that the disagreement between realists and expressivists should not be about how to assign semantic contents to ought-sentences in a compositionally systematic way. Neither the naïve view that these claims describe relations of being obligated to do or express attitudes of being for some action are very plausible in light of the full range of the linguistic data surrounding the word 'ought'. However, the core theoretical motivations for realism and expressivism in metaethics can remain intact even once we accept something like the possible worlds semantics for 'ought'. I've suggested that this is because these views are best seen not as competing views of what semantic

³² *Articulating Reasons*, p. 89.

³³ *ibid.*, p. 84.

content ought-sentences have but rather as competing views at a deeper metasemantic level of why it is that ought-sentences have the contents that they do. Second, once we've relocated the metaethical debate about the meaning of 'ought' to this area of what I called the fundamental theory of meaning (as opposed to the compositional semantics), I believe the dominant semantics for modal auxiliaries, which treats them as a kind of operator affecting the modality of a sentence (rather than a predicate expression), allows us to see the possibility of a third metasemantic view often left off of the menu of theoretical options in metaethics. This is the inferentialist view that explains their meaning not in terms of word-world descriptive relations nor in terms of word-idea expressive relations but in terms of word-word inferential relations. I haven't argued here that inferentialism is the best or complete view of why it is that 'ought' makes the semantic contribution that it makes. But the fact that our best semantics for this word treats it as a modal operator leads me to compare it not to essentially descriptive terms nor to essentially expressive terms but rather to essentially logical terms; and I think it is widely agreed that inferentialism is most plausible when it comes to logical words.

So, in a slogan, if 'ought' functions semantically as a modal-logical operator, as our best compositional semantics seems to suggest, then perhaps we should explain this in terms of its inferential rather than descriptive or expressive role.

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